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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SKOPJE 000880

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: GOM LEADERSHIP ON NATO MEMBERSHIP,
KOSOVO STATUS, NAME ISSUE, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Classified By: P/E CHIEF SHUBLER, REASONS 1.4(B) & (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY. In separate calls on PM Gruevski and FM Milososki September 15, the Ambassador urged the GOM to move quickly to implement NATO membership reforms, show concrete anti-corruption results, and restart political dialogue with the ethnic Albanian opposition. She restated the USG position on including resolution of the border demarcation issue in a Kosovo final status settlement, and urged the GOM to take a constructive approach on the name dispute with Greece. The Ambassador also pushed Gruevski for a more liberal religious freedom law, and cautioned against wholesale changes in the ranks of public administration professionals.

12. (C) Summary continued. Gruevski said he would lead interagency coordination on Macedonia's NATO membership bid, while Milososki underscored the GOM's commitment to showing concrete results in the fight against corruption. Both blamed ethnic Albanian opposition party DUI for the current political impasse, but Milososki said the government would work to build "bridges of cooperation" with DUI. On Kosovo, Gruevski said he would meet with PM Ceku September 19 to strengthen ties with Pristina, and Milososki reiterated the government's stance that border demarcation is a technical issue. Both said the government would stick to its policy of no further public statements on the name dispute, while Milososki highlighted close business and municipal cooperation ties with Greece. Gruevski indicated he would hold off on submitting to parliament a draft law on religious communities until his staff had studied EU standards for religious freedom, but noted strong pressure from the Macedonian Orthodox Church and Islamic Community to pass the existing draft law, which would restrict registration of other religious groups. End Summary.

INITIAL COURTESY CALLS ON PRIME MINISTER AND FOREIGN MINISTER

13. (U) Ambassador made separate initial courtesy calls on PM Gruevski and FM Milososki September 15. PM Gruevski was accompanied by his Chief of Cabinet, Martin Protogjer. Milososki was joined by State Secretary Igor Ilievski, Chief of Cabinet Cornelia Utevska, and State Counselor Milan Spirodonovski. DCM and P/E Chief (notetaker) accompanied Ambassador.

NATO MEMBERSHIP -- TIME IS SHORT, GET TO WORK!

14. (U) Ambassador told both Gruevski and Milososki that a successful bid to present the strongest possible candidacy for NATO membership in 2008 also would send a positive signal regarding Macedonia's EU prospects. There was much work to be done and time was of the essence. The GOM had about a year to demonstrate it was in a strong position to be considered for NATO membership.

15. (SBU) PM Gruevski reaffirmed his commitment to leading the NATO membership effort. He would head an interagency team comprised of the Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, and the NATO Membership Coordinator. Other members would include the Finance Minister, Minister of Interior, and others as required.

16. (C) FM Milososki underscored the importance of showing results in the fight against corruption as one of Macedonia's NATO membership requirements. The GOM wanted to "show more than a rhetorical commitment" to combating corruption, with a public prosecutor's office capable of tackling tough, high-profile cases. The government would not engage in "revanchisme" against the previous government in pursuing corruption cases.

17. (SBU) Regarding the upcoming Riga Summit, Milososki said the GOM hoped for an encouraging message in the final summit communiqu  that would not differentiate among the A-3 (Adriatic Charter) countries. He reiterated the GOM's commitment to continuing its support for peace operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Ambassador responded that the A-3 countries would be assessed for membership individually, and on the basis of performance.

REDOUBLE EFFORTS TO RESTART POLITICAL DIALOGUE WITH ALBANIAN

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OPPOSITION

18. (C) The Ambassador noted concerns in Washington and Brussels, which we shared, regarding the poor state of the government's relations with the major ethnic Albanian opposition party, DUI. The GOM needed to demonstrate generosity, understanding, and flexibility in trying to re-engage DUI in political dialogue. The Embassy was willing to facilitate and support that process. It was important for the government to succeed in that effort, and to limit communications with DUI to private channels.

19. (C) Gruevski complained that he had been able to meet with all the opposition parties except DUI to discuss their concerns. He noted that he had first tried to establish contact with DUI leader Ali Ahmeti through private channels. When Ahmeti did not respond, he had publicly called for a one-on-one meeting. Ahmeti had countered with a public proposal for the two to meet in Sipkovica, once the site during the 2001 conflict of the HQs of the National Liberation Army, which Ahmeti had led. That venue was politically untenable, Gruevski said. He had countered with a public offer to meet in Skopje, which Ahmeti had refused.

110. (C) Milososki said Gruevski had tried early on to bring DUI into government, together with the smaller ethnic Albanian party DPA. He asserted that DUI's insistence on keeping DPA out of the government, however, and its "unrealistic" political demands, "rhetorical blackmail," and image as a party involved in corrupt activities, made that attempt a "mission impossible." Nevertheless, the government wanted to build "bridges of cooperation" with DUI, especially through the Ministry of Local Self-Government's work with DUI-controlled municipalities.

KOSOVO STATUS -- KEEPING DEMARCATION OFF THE FRONT BURNER

111. (SBU) The Ambassador restated our position on border demarcation and said we would push for including resolution of the matter in any Kosovo final status agreement. In the

meantime, it would be useful for the GOM to continue previous efforts to strengthen ties with Pristina.

¶12. (SBU) Gruevski agreed, noting that he planned to meet PM Ceku in Skopje on September 19. He also was trying to arrange meetings with Albanian leaders and other leaders in neighboring countries to strengthen regional ties. He hoped to visit the U.S. next year. In his meeting, Milososki said that the GOM wanted to keep demarcation "a technical issue," and to keep it off the front burner as a Macedonian policy priority.

NAME ISSUE -- MACEDONIA COMMITTED TO UN PROCESS

¶13. (C) Ambassador told Gruevski that, with Greek local elections approaching, it was unlikely there would be any movement soon in the UN talks on the name dispute. In the meantime, it would be prudent to avoid provocative statements.

¶14. (C) Gruevski acknowledged that, shortly after he assumed office, Macedonian journalists had tried to pin him down on the name issue, even though they already knew his position on the matter. He initially had responded, but quickly decided there was no further need to discuss the dispute in public.

¶15. (C) Milososki said the GOM had decided to restate Macedonia's position on the name, and to then avoid further public discussion of the matter. The government would try to find a compromise solution through the UN negotiations process, but resolving the issue was likely to take time. He noted Macedonia's excellent bilateral trade and commercial ties with Greece, as well as extensive cross-border cooperation between Macedonian and Greek municipalities.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM -- PUSH FOR BROADER LIBERTIES

¶16. (U) The Ambassador noted the September 15 release of the annual International Religious Freedom report. She urged the GOM to continue efforts to resolve the status of an Orthodox priest recognized by the Serb Orthodox Church as Bishop Jovan of Ohrid, but considered a schismatic by the Macedonian

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Orthodox Church (MOC). Citing strong US congressional interest, the Ambassador said it also was important to ensure the draft law on religious communities and groups allowed the broadest possible religious freedoms, including the right of more than one group per confession to register.

¶17. (C) Gruevski said he recently had met with the representatives of Macedonia's five established religious communities (MOC, Islamic Community/ICM, Catholic Church, Jewish Community, and Methodist Church) and they fully supported the draft law. They had indicated they would fight amendments to the law making it easier for other groups to register. Citing the MOC's high poll ratings, and the ICM's argument that liberalizing registration criteria would allow "Islamic radicals" to enter Macedonia, Gruevski said it would be difficult to oppose those communities. He asked whether he should try to move the current draft law forward.

¶18. (C) The Ambassador advised against trying to pass the draft law in its current form. She noted that the ICM argument failed to account for the fact that Islamic radical groups already could, and did, enter Macedonia simply by registering as NGOs.

¶19. (C) Gruevski agreed, and said he would ask his staff to analyze religious freedom laws from other EU countries for applicable lessons. Milososki said he understood the US approach to religious freedom, having seen the diversity of religious institutions in the U.S. while visiting his brother, who lives in Chicago. However, churches in the Balkans had long served as "cradles of nationalism." Any approach to changing Balkan religious freedom standards had

to take that fact into account.

AVOIDING WHOLESALE CHANGES IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

¶20. (SBU) The Ambassador also expressed concerns over reports that public administration professionals, including some who had been trained at USG expense, were being moved around or demoted in the Ministry of Interior and other ministries. That did not bode well for efforts to professionalize the public administration; the USG strongly opposed wholesale changes in the administration at the mid and working levels in particular. Gruevski tried to defend the reassignments by arguing that, even when professionals were moved out of their previous positions, those slots were subsequently filled with trained professionals.

COMMENT

¶21. (C) Gruevski and Milososki understand the need to move quickly to fulfill NATO membership requirements, including the need to show results in the fight against corruption. They will be hampered in that effort, however, if they fail to muster the creativity and leadership needed to resolve the festering dispute with the opposition, leaving it to absorb the leadership's time and energy and casting Macedonia in a negative light abroad.

¶22. (C) The GOM has taken adopted constructive stances on Kosovo border demarcation and the name dispute, recognizing the need to keep both issues off the front burner and out of the media. On Kosovo, it will be important for the USG to ensure the Contact Group includes resolution of the demarcation issue in a final status settlement.

MILOVANOVIC